

Voices of Survivors: Stories of Courage and Hope





This booklet is a product of the Massachusetts Rural Domestic and Sexual Violence Project of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

The Massachusetts Rural Domestic and Sexual Violence Project provides comprehensive counseling and advocacy to rural children and families affected by domestic and dating violence and offers numerous educational programs addressing domestic and sexual violence and its impact on children throughout rural Massachusetts.

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The organizations and individuals working in rural Massachusetts communities who hear stories of survival every day and tirelessly lend support to families in times of need.

And finally, all the women who had the courage and strength to share their stories.

Cover Artist: Dana Wilde is an artist, performer and champion of natural creativity. Utilizing a personal connection with creative spirit, she explores and expresses her true self, and her experience of surviving and healing from long-term child abuse, including sexual abuse. Dana was born in New Jersey in 1974, and has lived in Massachusetts since before kindergarten.

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Introduction:

We know women who live in fear of their lives, women trapped and isolated – whose spirits have been broken by years of abuse.

We know children who cannot trust their caregivers and who do not feel safe in their homes.

Each of the stories in this handbook begins with a journey, a journey often fraught with profound fear and struggle and obscured by both personal and systemic obstacles: How do I survive this? How do I keep my children safe? Where do I go? How do I pay my bills? These questions emerge throughout these stories and represent the diverse range of experiences victims of abuse so often face.

Along the way, despite all of the obstacles, victims sometimes find the resources to become survivors.

The Voices of Survivors Project is a selection of first hand accounts of abused women and their children living in rural areas, who tell us in their own words how they struggled,

then learned to survive and became empowered in the process. Although their names have been changed for their protection, as well as other identifying information, we must recognize the courage and strength that it took for them to come forward.

And sometimes when we hear these stories it's hard to remember the remarkable changes that can take place with support, or shelter, or advocacy and organizing, policy making and education. But we must remember. We do know women who get free. We know children who are resilient and strong – people who come out of harrowing situations and manage to find genuine stability and love.

"You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do."

-Eleanor Roosevelt

"Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says I'll try again tomorrow."

-Mary Anne Radmacher

PLEASE NOTE: Due to the nature of the material in this handbook, please preview these pages first before sharing them with children.

Nancy



The most important part is not to judge people when they are going through this.

I spent nine years with an abusive man. It was about a year and a half into the relationship when I began to notice that he was really abusive. It started in a subtle way, with putdowns and criticisms and then he broke my finger. I would become so neurotic because he would always try to find something wrong with me. I wasn't allowed to use the phone. He would lock me in the bedroom. He used to have people watching me to see if I left the house during the day. I was constantly worried about going out anywhere. I wasn't sleeping and I was always jumpy.

Now I realize how influenced I was by him. I couldn't even go to the grocery store without being afraid that he would do something to me or the kids. I had to tell him what I was going for – and when I would be back. In an abusive relationship you can lie a lot. I think that's what troubles me the most - the lies I told my children, the lies I told myself. I would lie to my daughters and tell them that I had fallen down the stairs.

Every day I would think about leaving but I was so scared. He made me think that he would do something to me, threatening my family, my kids. At the time I thought if anyone got hurt it would be my fault and I couldn't handle that. There were times when he would wake me up in the middle of the night and pull my hair, accusing me of having an affair. I honestly don't think that I would be alive today if I had stayed with him. The abuse just got worse and worse.

I came very close to death. He would keep me up for days and days without sleep - hitting me constantly, pushing me down and threatening that I would not see my girls if I left him. Then one day he wound up choking me and I said, "No more!" I remember running down the street with him chasing me like a crazy man, telling me that he was going to kill me. I was running as fast as I could, not knowing where I was going. I wound up at a friend's house way over on the other side of town. You don't think when you're in that state of mind, you just react.

I was gone for a year and then I went back. He pleaded with me to come back saying that I was the only one that he wanted and that everything would change. The abuse was worse than the first time around. That last time when he was choking me and I was on my knees I kept thinking, "I am never going to see my kids again." I kept thinking about how they would feel. They begged me so many times to leave him. "Please," they'd say. In my heart I felt bad. My kids needed me.

I left over a year and a half ago and I'm still scared. He's still out there trying to get to me. After my mother passed away he sent me an e-mail threatening to kill me. They now have a warrant out for his arrest for abusing another woman, but I don't know if an arrest is going to do it. There were many times in the first six months that I was going to go back, but I kept thinking that I had to make a decision between my girls and my ex. I knew that there really wasn't any choice. It had to be my girls. Whenever we got together during that time, I would always have to prove to him that I loved him. He never told me how he felt about me... except to share his hatred and say that everything was my fault. I was always trying to make his life better.

Right after I left that last time, I contacted a domestic violence program. They were one of my strongest supports. My counselor told me it wasn't going to be easy - and she was right. She would always say, "It will get better." I had a hard time believing that. But one day I actually found that it was better. I think the only way to stop the abuse

is by stopping the abuser. I can get help and I can get help for my kids but it doesn't stop it for another woman.

My kids gave me the greatest hope. They were my strength. My kids are now teenagers. My oldest is in college. She says, "Mom you are one of the strongest women I know." I did this for them. I wouldn't have even met the guy I'm seeing now if it hadn't been for my kids. They convinced me that I couldn't let my whole life be about what had happened in the past.

Although the rest of my family loves me they don't understand abuse. They know I went through it and they're angry that I went through it. They say things like, "How could you have been so stupid - staying with him? He was nothing but a jerk." But unless you actually lived it, you probably can't understand. I mean I would have told you twenty years ago I would never live with an abusive man. You start out thinking it's going to be great and then it becomes abusive - very gradually. And though there are good times, there are more bad times. When the abuser is bad it can be pretty bad, but when they're nice they can be so charming and try to make up for everything they've done to you. And then you let your guard down and you are on that teeter totter. He kind of just wore me down.

I am still healing. I still have fear. I am up at four to go to work and I will see a shadow and be all jumpy. Even though I can still get triggered, I try to find something that will make me happy

almost every day. I love that I can have breakfast and go to work and go to the supermarket without any pressure. I don't have to explain myself. Now I can relax doing just the simple things.

Survivors need people who can listen. I think the most important part is not to judge people when they are going through this. You're already being judged so much. Each community needs a place where women can feel safe to talk about the abuse. We need to find ways to stop the abuse. We have to stop asking why women go back. I understand it, but so many people don't.

Everyone was afraid to step in. We had friends and neighbors that knew but didn't do anything. Everyone would say he was a good guy. He could act like he was such a good person. But now that I'm not with him, people who knew what was happening say, "Thank God you got away from him."

It's hard for women to believe that they can find happiness, but it is possible. I have great kids and I recently married a wonderful man. When I see other women going through what I went through, I just want to help.

Commentary

Nancy's story gives us a snapshot of what life is like living with an abuser. "Unless you actually lived it you probably can't understand," she says. How true this statement is. People imagine that life with an abuser is clearly all bad. However, an abuser often has a charming side and "when they are nice they can be so charming." Nancy did not fabricate or imagine this. Abusers typically charm people, including the police, the therapist, and most sadly, the judge. However, along with the charm they use subtle means of asserting control, effectively stripping the woman of her sense of self. The frequent well-calculated put downs and criticisms and the enforcement of compliance so that she doesn't fully realize how influenced she is by him keep her under his control. She makes excuses for his behavior by lying to her children and herself and believes that everything is her fault even if anyone was hurt by him. And he may keep her in a state of terror by suggesting or perpetrating violence on her and/or the children.

Nancy got help, left, and yet she is still scared. She is accurate in saying that "the only way to stop the abuse is by stopping the abuser."





Maria

*Now That I Am Safe,
I am Finding Myself*

I was born in Central America. I have a 10 year old son. In Colombia I worked for 14 years in a bank. I had several positions: teller, secretary and accountant.

My ex and I lived together for a short period of time - six months as my boyfriend and six months married. I met him while on vacation in the United States. We continued to email and phone each other after I returned home and eventually we decided to get married and I came to live with him in the U.S. That was three years ago.

What made me feel like this was not a “normal” relationship was the time he started crying after I went out to the mall with my mother. When I came home,

he was very angry because I had been out for too long. He thought that maybe I was looking for boyfriends when I was with my mother, my sister and my son. Later he threw a phone against the wall and then asked me to forgive him and started to cry. From that moment on, I felt I was not in a safe relationship and that is how it was constantly.

The first thing I recognized as abuse was when my partner would not let me have any contact with others. He controlled everything I did at home. He did not want me to work or to study. When I cleaned the house, he was never happy with how I did things. He was always correcting me.

In the six months that we were married I lived like a prisoner. When my family visited me at home, he was always angry—he did not want anyone to visit me. When I went out with my mother or my sister, he always got angry. Everything was a problem. When I did house chores, if I put something in one place, he would put it in another place. There was always something negative about anything I did.

We lived in an area of mostly white people where everyone spoke only English. He spoke very limited Spanish. When we met he was studying Spanish and supposedly he was going to continue, but immediately after we got married he stopped. Then the communication between the two of us was very limited since I did not speak any English and his Spanish was very limited.

From the moment we got married I told him that I had to obtain legal residency as soon as possible. So as soon as we were married I asked him to submit the papers and he always said he would, but never did it. Then when we had our first fight, only eight days after getting married, he told me that if I did not stay with him, he would make sure I would go back to Colombia and it was a continuous threat. Two months after our arrival, he submitted the documents to immigration, but only because I constantly asked him to do it. He kept all the documents locked away and I did not trust him at all. He constantly asked me to give him my and my son's passport. I never wanted to give them to him because I did not trust him. After we fought the first time he told me.

“Now you are going back to Colombia.” and asked me to give him my passport. Instead I gave them to my sister for her to put in a safe place. That is one way I saw that he wanted to control me.

The drop that made the glass overflow was when he pulled out the phone line at home. One day I was talking to my mother by phone and he got very angry and started saying that I made 50 calls, when I had just made two. Later I found out that he had pulled out the phone cord and that made me very scared.

That night I slept in the living room with the phone in my hands. I had an anxiety attack and went to the hospital and there I found help. When I arrived at the hospital I called my sister and explained to her what was happening and that I had called the police. The police suggested that I get a protection order against him since it was not the first time that they had come to the house because of domestic violence. That was the last fight, when he disconnected the phone. A counselor at the hospital told me about some options I might pursue and gave me a card for a domestic violence program.

After I left the hospital I called the domestic violence program and I was connected with a counselor, and she explained step by step the characteristics of an abuser. I listened to her and was imagining him and realized my husband had all the typical behavior of a controlling, abusive person. Then they put me in contact with a women's shelter, where my son and I

stayed for a month or so. Once I felt my son and I were safe, I started making my own decisions and little by little, I found myself. I decided to leave him.

I know that I made the right decision by the fact that I'm working, that I'm going to school, that I can go out alone to the store and do what I need to without depending on anyone—feeling free.

I felt strong because of my son, because I knew that my son needed me. Since I took him out of his environment, I took him away from his culture, his friends, and his school only to follow someone who was not worth it. It was because of my son that I felt that I had to change the direction of that situation and he gave me the strength.

My son was affected very badly—he changed a lot. During the abuse his behavior was very aggressive, but I think that because we left that house, he has changed a lot. Now he is an excellent student. The teachers don't have any complaints about him; everything they have to say about him is positive. Back then, he was always in fights with his friends, he was never happy. He was affected very badly by the experience, but little by little he has been changing for the better. As far as our relationship, my son used to side with my ex-husband and criticize me. But now we have a very good relationship. When we want to play, we play. When we want to eat, we eat. We watch TV—different from when we were with my ex—when we had to do what he said.

I teach my son to respect others and I think that we should teach the children who are the future that they should respect, tolerate and trust. Where there is no respect or trust there is nothing.

After I left my husband, I thought that I would never be capable of being alone because I did not know the language. I did not know the area. I didn't know anything, not even where the church was or what to eat. Then little by little I learned that I could do it, thanks to the counselors who helped me.

I have become very fond of those who were around me and helped me, like the counselors at the domestic violence programs. I felt that they never judged me, they never questioned me if it was true or not, or if I was just taking advantage of the situation because I did not have documents. They trusted me. I received more rejection from my family because they are very traditional. My mother is very traditional. She believes that “matrimony is for the rest of your life” and that it is my duty to be with my husband. But thanks to the other people around me from these organizations, I am here and I have made the best decision.

I would say to others, who may be trying to leave, don't stay if you can leave. A man is not everything. You can make it without him. You can make it happen alone. No one, absolutely no one deserves to be with someone who mistreats them. You shouldn't have to stay with someone because you're worried “what

are people going to say?” or because of an economic need or because of legal dependency, not for any benefit that one could get from the abuser.

I think that I have several good things in my life right now, thank God. I have a very good relationship with my son. My son is doing well in school. I am in school and I'm learning a lot. I'm studying English and I'm working in my community as a

“home visitor” in an ESL (English as a Second Language) school for adults.

I'm learning from people and I feel free to do what I want to do, with economic limitations, of course! My freedom is so valuable, more than any material thing. When I was with him I had all my economic needs covered. I did not need anything, but I did not have my freedom.

Commentary

“I lived like a prisoner.” Abusers enforce incarceration. Although it may look like the woman can come and go at will, her freedom comes with a huge cost - “he started crying after I went out to the mall with my mother;” “when my family visited me...he was always angry;” “when I went out...he always got angry;” “he pulled out the phone one day [when] I was talking to my mother;” he did not submit the papers to allow her to attain legal residency. Fortunately for Maria, the hospital personnel and the police gave her information that offered a framework that described his abusive behavior. Fortunately for Maria she was able to get a protection order against him. Fortunately for Maria, she was not judged and her word was trusted. This set Maria free so that she is no longer his prisoner.





Amy Waldman

Jamie



I could no longer hear the rocks pinging off of the undercarriage of our black Nissan. Just seconds ago it had stormed out of the driveway. I waited. Then it hit, it was heavy. Not heavy like a large boulder or an object. It felt more like a wet blanket that covered the entire yard. It was dark and scary - almost more so than the immense noise that had finally ceased. The blanket enwrapped me, began to cover my head and cut off my air supply. It was the blanket of silence.

Kyle and I sat in the front yard on our tire swing. We swayed back and forth by the use of our feet. It was so quiet. It seemed so still. "Kyle, why does Dad yell so much at Mom?" I asked. "I dunno," he said. "Do you think she'll ever come back?" "Yah, of course she will."

I tried hard to stop my tears. I couldn't let my older brother see me cry. He would call me a baby and tell me to grow up.

I looked at the house. It seemed so dark. I knew Dad would be in the shop, swearing and working on one of his snowmobiles. Where did Mom go? She had never done this. She had never left before. Usually she retreated into her room, folded laundry and watched Oprah. She never left. I wanted her back.

"Kyle, are you sure Mom will come back? She never leaves."

"She'll come, stop worrying so much. Why don't we go play or something?" I agreed and we made our way to the tree house. It was our sanctuary, the silence there was lighter.

It happened a lot. I can't remember what it was about, it didn't matter. He always started it. That day Kyle and I were downstairs, watching TV. Then it started. No warning, the peaceful silence was broken by the screaming of my dad. Constant swears flew out of his mouth. He was always so angry. Mom's voice always sounded too quiet and weak, defenseless against his powerful boom. She would always start off talking; eventually her tone and volume would rise. She sounded scared. I looked to Kyle for support, I needed him now. He nodded in recognition and said, "Let's go, Jamie." We walked out of the basement and headed for the swing. The echoing voices got a bit quieter as we distanced ourselves from the house. Kyle was only two years older than I but he always seemed stronger, more sure of himself.

At the tree house I could hear the birds around us. The silence was getting lighter as the time passed. "Kyle?" The sound of my voice shocked me.

Commentary

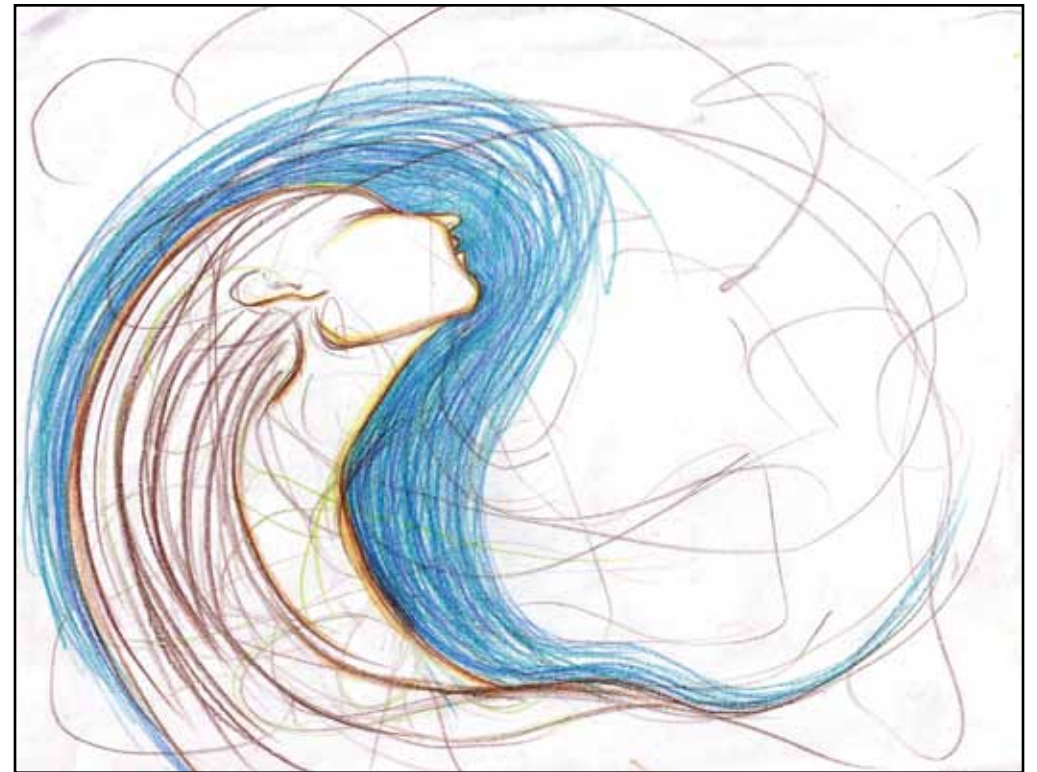
Jamie so eloquently says what so many children say: that silence is suffocating, dark, empty, and ominous. Children see so much; they experience so deeply the violence, the comments, the tactile sensations of tension that fills a home and family. Children are constantly trying to figure out and provide a context to their experience and without a voice they will not be able to find a context to their experiences.

A child's voice is so powerful. It is imperative that children have safe places to share their knowledge and encounters with violence. It is the teachers, clergy, nurses, counselors, parents, siblings, family, and doctors who come into contact with children that have the ability to foster that voice, to ask a question, and most importantly to listen to children.

"What do you wanna do?"
"Why don't we go for a walk?"
"OK." I said.

As we walked the silence was still there. How could I break it? Kyle didn't feel like talking. I could always sing. I always had my voice to break the silence. Although my seven year old voice was much weaker than Dad's it still worked. I could hum. That way, I wouldn't bother Kyle. That always felt better.

I was beginning to tear a hole through the black blanket that smothered me. I just kept humming. We rounded the corner of the trail and faced the driveway to see the Nissan was back. I yelled to Kyle, "Mom's back!" "I know," he said. We both ran in to find her. The silence was almost as scary for me as the yelling. It was harder to break. But I have a tool that can cut through that so called blanket of silence. I have my voice.



Dana Wilde

Maya



There is hope

I had taken criminal justice as a major in college and I was always interested in working with people who had been incarcerated and who needed help re-entering society. I helped incarcerated men find employment while they were in the work release program and that is where I met my ex.

I always had the philosophy that everyone deserves a second chance in life. People mess up and sometimes it's the nature of their surroundings and their experiences, so I kind of felt that if people really wanted the chance I was willing to help them get to that point where they could do something more fruitful with their lives.

When I met T., he was a very quiet, polite-kind of southern gentleman. I was thinking here's this guy who's in the news who is supposed to be this really bad person, but I wanted to kind of look past that. I didn't condone what he did, but I tried to put

that aside. And so we ended up getting together. And, I'm sure people on the outside looking in would probably say, "Why are you even bothering?" I really thought that maybe it could work. I guess I thought that maybe I could change him but there was a part inside of me that knew that he was not a true love to me.

I still deal with this in therapy – trying to figure out why. I mean I think I am a smart person. I'm educated. I went to college, so why did I get hooked in with this? And yet, I did. I guess he reeled me into feeling like he cared about me. He told me things that I hadn't heard from other people. I hadn't been in a lot of other relationships and there were things that we had in common and so it just kind of progressed from there.

Looking back, I did see some signs of his possessiveness. He needed to know where I was and what I was doing. If I would tell him, "Listen, I'm going to come and see you at your place," and I wasn't there right on time, he would barrage me with questions. "Where were you?" "What were you doing?" Or he would

just act very cold towards me, like I had offended him in some way. I was supposed to figure out what it was that I did to make him all upset. So I would just try to smooth things over and yet inside I was thinking I hadn't done anything wrong. I don't think I thought of it as abusive. I thought, I don't like feeling the way I'm feeling when he's being this way.

He asked me to marry him within months of us knowing each other. He kept pushing it. The whole time I was with him, he pushed it. And I never gave in. I always had an excuse for not marrying him. There was something in my gut saying that it wasn't what I really wanted.

At first my mother and my step-father didn't know who T. was. He's kind of a gruff looking guy when you look at him, but yet he can show a sweet side. He could give the shirt off his back to a total stranger. And yet there was this other side to him that would get easily offended by other people. He'd feel that people were ganging up on him. I made excuses for this man for years to people. I'd say, "He was in prison for a long time. He has a hard time socializing. It's going to take him awhile to come around, you know." And then my parents found out who he was and my step-father said he didn't want him in his house. At that point I wanted to break it off, but I didn't know how to do it. I was fearful of him. I knew he had almost killed his first wife and I couldn't figure out how to end it without it going badly.

And then I found out I was pregnant.

I wish I had never told him that I was pregnant. I was raised Catholic and I felt that an abortion wasn't an option. I was very torn. I wanted to end my relationship but I knew that I had a baby to think about and so I decided to stay.

I became more isolated. I didn't want him to meet my friends or my family. I wanted to keep it hidden. I didn't want to talk about how I was feeling or what I was going through because I thought people would say, "I told you so." "Why did you even bother getting involved with this guy?" I felt like I had to defend myself for my own actions.

He didn't beat me up day after day; it wasn't that kind of abuse. He raped me well over one hundred times while I was with him. I was afraid every day that it would happen again. I was afraid mostly at night but I learned it could happen anytime, anywhere. He learned from his time of beating his ex-wife that people can see the bruises. People can see the scars. But with the stuff he did to me, people can't see that. And I was very ashamed. I was always scared. I thought he would kill me if I left. But I also thought he might still do it if I stayed. Eventually I knew I had to get out. It took me almost a year to leave.

I guess my son was about five years old when I finally decided to leave him. T. tried to bar me from leaving the apartment. I was getting pretty loud in the hopes that maybe someone in our building would call the police. He said, "You're not going." I said, "I just want to go."

We were on the porch when my friend showed up to pick me up. She saw us on the porch and she yelled up, "What's going on? Can I come on up?" I said I was okay. T. yelled down to her, "No, you can't come up". And she asked again, "Are you sure you're okay?" He was standing right there, so I said, "You just go ahead without me. I'm not going to go." But as she was walking away she looked back up towards me and I tried to mouth the words, "help me."

She knew something was going on but she wasn't sure what to do.

I was so angry. I think this was the first time I thought, "I've had it." I told him, "I want you to leave. I want you to get out of my house." He said, "I'm not leaving." I picked up the phone and dialed 911 but he hung up the phone. So I was waiting, thinking they were going to call. But they didn't call. I was almost hysterical at this point because I just wanted out. I was tired of it. I was finally letting out all the feelings and emotions that I'd had pent up for 8 years. I was standing near the bathroom and he grabbed me by the throat and pushed me up against the bathroom wall and he had his hand around my throat. I couldn't breathe and I never felt anything like that in my life. I thought, "I am going to die." I couldn't breathe, I couldn't do anything. He just had me by one hand. He was that strong.

My son was standing right there. He said "Daddy, let her go. Please let her go." I don't know what it was, but T. let me go.

Maybe it was my son's pleading tone of voice. Whatever it was, he snapped out of it. My son was crying at that point, and I was crying and my son helped me to the living room, and got me a towel to wipe my eyes and he sat next to me. He had witnessed probably the most horrible thing any child could witness, and T. was manic. T. was walking around the house thinking that the police were going to show up because I had tried calling. He said to me that he would kill me if I ever left and that he would go through anybody, my family, my friends, anybody, to get to me and then he implied that he would kill himself and that our son would then be an orphan.

We were held captive there pretty much all day until he had to go to work. He just kept saying, "I'm not leaving until I know you're not going to call the police." And then he dragged my son into it. "Mommy can't call the police on Daddy. You don't want to see Daddy go to jail." And so our son had me promising him that I wouldn't call the police as soon as he left.

The woman who had come to pick me up went back to work the next day and told another woman about what had happened and she approached me when I went to work and said, "Listen, I'm here and I'm willing to sit and talk with you if you want it." She was the one that opened the gateway for me to get help. She looked up a domestic violence program in the phonebook and wrote down the phone number and left me in her office so that I could make that call. This program referred me to a counselor, who has helped

me in so many ways. I met with her weekly so that we could formulate a plan. I had to do it in a way that I felt would be the safest for me and my son. Everyone I met along the way told me that we should just leave, go underground. At that point, I didn't want to leave my life. He had already taken so much from me that I was damned if I was going to have to quit my job and leave my family and friends because of this guy.

I had secretly been taking stuff out of my house. I had key people at work who knew what was happening. They were great. I'd take stuff from home, important papers, and I'd give them to these people, clothes and things that I wanted, photographs, any stuff that I could secretly remove. I was leaving my apartment. I left everything else. I had to do it slowly without him knowing what I was doing.

We finally went to Georgia and stayed with family for six weeks. T. did not know where we were. He called everyone that I knew. He had his boss call my mother and harass her on the phone. He had all these people believing that he was the victim in all this, and not me. So they called everyone who might know how to find us. I finally decided to come back. I wanted to be near my family and friends. As soon as I got off the plane I met with my counselor and we went immediately to the courthouse to get a restraining order.

I was hoping he'd just cool down and we'd be able to kind of settle things civilly, but I was always scared because I heard how angry he was. To this day, I can't be sure

that he won't come after me. He's gotten married and has another child and if somehow something goes wrong with that scenario I can't say that I won't be a target.

After we left it was really difficult for awhile. I was so traumatized by everything that had happened to me I didn't know who I was and I had to do a lot of work to find out. But there were a lot of things that kept me going. People gave me money. People called me up and came to visit. People would take my son and me out to do things.

I not only had to deal with my own stuff, I had to deal with my son's pain, too. I had to make a living to support us. I tried to hold everything together and I did it. I needed to be able to stand on my own two feet and I did it. I worked, and I had my apartment back, and I had my friends around me, and I had my son. I had full custody because I never married the guy. I had a lot of things going for me but I know a lot of other women don't and so I feel fortunate in that respect.

The abuse was especially hard on my older son. M. had a lot of problems, night terrors, he couldn't sleep at night. He could get out of control because of all the trauma he went through. I'm trying to get him to branch out a little bit, to become his own person. At 13, that's what they start doing, yet he still says, "I miss you, Mom. Where were you all day?"

I want people to know how important it was that I had someone to call anytime I

needed to, someone who didn't blame me. That was the biggest comfort. I felt alone for so many years. Finally sharing it with people helped a lot. Many times I've wished I could go back and change it, but I can't, so I have to live with who I am today. I still have flashbacks. I still have times when I'm very fearful. There are still times I'm very anxious. But I have to focus on the present, today. I have a husband. I have my sons. I have my life. I have my friends. I have my family and I have my counselor and that's really what keeps me going.

I think abuse survivors need to know that they can make it out of the abuse. They can have a life after this. It probably won't be easy. You have to be able to

do it in a way that you feel good about. Survivors need to know that women do leave, and then they go back, and then they leave and then they come back and you know it's hard because some women don't have the opportunity to work.

I never thought I would ever get married. I never thought I would have another child, I never thought I'd have my own house and that I would be able to be a stay at home mom with my child. I never thought I would have any of that. I thought I would be alone for the rest of my life. I want people to know that there is hope out there, and I would do anything I could for another woman to help her to get there.

Commentary

"I always had the philosophy that everyone deserves a second chance in life." With this statement Maya characterizes the "caretaker" role associated with women in our culture. But all through her story we hear the mixed feelings she felt while in her relationship with T. She knew what he had done to his first wife, almost killed her, but like many women she wanted to believe him, that his wife was at fault or that he had learned and changed.

There are so many warning signs in Maya's story, the telltale characteristics that domestic violence organizations call "Red Flags". Throughout the story Maya tells us, "...inside I was thinking I hadn't done anything wrong", "There was something in my gut saying that it wasn't what I really wanted." Her intuition and his abusive behaviors seemed to parallel each other during the eight year relationship.

"Survivors need to know that women do leave, and then they go back, and then they leave and then they go back and you know it's hard..." This quote from Maya's story reminds us what a complex and convoluted bond exists between batterer and battered. She tells us of those who helped her to leave and the importance of making a plan. Leaving or threatening to leave is the most dangerous time for women in Maya's situation. Having a plan to leave safely is the most important thing.



Christina
3/07

Angela



Faith gave me the courage to walk out of this relationship

I grew up in a home where I saw my mother's boyfriend beating on her, so I knew what domestic violence was, but I didn't know the extent of it. I used to jump in the fight and help my mother and one day I told my mother's boyfriend that I hated him. He was threatening to beat me and I told him if he ever put his hands on me I was going to kill him. When I went to live with my grandparents I always despised my mother for the abuse. I thought, "Why is she staying there?" I had resentment and I always said that I wasn't going to be like her. But you know what they say, "Never say never".

I got married for all the wrong reasons. I was actively using drugs at the time I met my ex-husband. I met him at an AA meeting. I didn't really see a companion, I saw a provider, because he was really good at providing, taking care of the home, the bills and my check

was my check. I just ignored all the other red flags because it enabled me to use drugs the way I wanted to. So the signs were there, I just ignored them.

From the outside you would never know anything was wrong. On the surface my family looked well put together, but once we got home, behind closed doors, all hell broke loose. Everyone thought of him as this God-fearing man, a good provider, a dedicated father, and a loving husband but in reality this man was a devil. I now had a better understanding of what my mother had gone through all those years. She had her reasons for staying in an abusive relationship and I had mine. Because of the issues with drugs, my husband had gained custody of my children so staying with him was the only way that I could be around my kids, or so I told myself. I would get clean and think that everything was going to be okay with him, however, I was getting

treatment and he wasn't and so the abuse just kept repeating. I really got tired of it.

One day he called the police and he lied and told them I had a gun so that he could get me out of the house. They came in with guns drawn. I called my brother and sister-in-law who came over. I said to my sister-in-law, "I feel like a dog on a leash," and she turned around and said, "Well, get off the leash!" At that moment something just clicked inside. I stayed a little while longer and then I bounced back and forth, leaving him and coming back. I relapsed once again and then I got into an even crazier relationship with this guy who barricaded me in the house. I thought, "Enough already." I could no longer tolerate the pain that I was dealing with. The drugs weren't working. I couldn't self-medicate and I knew it was time to end this. I needed to go and get help.

God opened the window of opportunity for me to come out to Greenfield. "Greenfield?!" I thought, "That's so far away from Boston. Should I really go so far away from my kids?" It was a difficult decision. The guilt was immeasurable. I didn't want to leave my children in the midst of all the madness but my sister-in-law said to me, "Well, you can't even take care of yourself; how are you going to take care of them?" I really got it. I needed this time to heal personally before I could bring my children home. I realized that in order for me to be in the position to provide for and take care of my children, first I had to provide for and take care of myself. I knew that I needed to get away from him and away from my

environment. I needed to give myself the chance to start over and I believed that God was going to provide for me and so I stepped out on faith and moved out here.

I went to a domestic violence program and stayed in their safe house for 3 months. I felt so relieved to be away from the abuse, but my spirit was broken. I felt unworthy of anything good in life. I see now that I believed a lot of the things that man had said to me over the years and I doubted I could make it without him. I was in the shelter for two or three days by myself in the house, just me and staff. I was able to talk openly about the domestic and substance abuse. I was really afraid to be honest about the substance abuse because a lot of shelters will not take you in if you're dealing with addiction, but I was not judged by any of the staff.

My healing process has been a tough one but with God's grace and the support of the staff and my peers, I made it. I started going to meetings as well. I had worked in the field as a substance abuse counselor and I basically knew what I had to do to stay sober.

It is my faith that gave me the courage to walk out of that relationship. It was my faith that helped me to believe in myself. I didn't have to depend upon any man. I was smart enough to go to school and I could stand on my own two feet. Knowing that God didn't bring me this far to leave me, I believed that I had taken the first step to my true recovery and healing. I was welcomed with open arms into this

community. At that point I knew that I didn't have to turn back. It was like a surrendering process for me. I knew that I couldn't do anything without God. I just really diligently reached out for help.

I think the biggest turning point for me was when I made up my mind to go back to school. I was really afraid, but I had all of these women encouraging me. When I wanted to give up one of them would say, "You don't have to live the life you've been living. You can do this." It was hard but I found myself actually being successful in school and ended up being one of the top students. This really gave my self-esteem a boost. Not only was I encouraging myself but I found that other women around me were being inspired by me to do better for themselves. They began seeking me out for help and advice which I realize is part of my purpose, which is to give back and encourage women who are in domestic violence and substance abuse situations.

In terms of support systems, my youngest brother, who is a minister, was my strongest supporter. Regardless of what I have and have not done, he has been there for me. During those hard times, I would call my brother and I would ask him to pray me through and we would have prayer on the phone. It seemed like after connecting with him in prayer, my spirit would open up and I would be able to see a clearer way. I wasn't afraid to say, "I don't know", or to ask, "Can you help me?" I struggled with pride for a long time, not able to ask for help.

I come from a gifted family and enjoy singing which is what I do to keep my sanity. My grandmother used to always say to me that you should always have a song and a prayer in your heart. I've always had that prayer but it seems like when you have been through what I've been through sometimes it's hard to pray. But a song is always there, whether I sing it or I hum it, that song is there for me.

I also have a mentor, who is like my mother and she has something like 30 years clean. She's a spiritual woman. When my mother passed away she just stepped up to the plate and said, "I'm here when you're ready." I also have to give a lot of credit to a probation officer that I had. She played a major role in my life. We met years ago, but she still helps me out and gives me advice. I just love her. I really do. Initially I didn't like this lady. Then I realized that she wasn't there to hurt me, she was there to help me and she is still helping me today.

The reason I am sharing this story is because I want other women to know that they don't have to stay stuck in any situation. There is hope. You can stay stuck or you can see into the future and say, "You know what, I want better and I'm going to have better." Then you work to make it happen. I want my children to know that it is okay to be afraid of succeeding, that's healthy fear. It is worse to not try at all and sit back and wonder, "What if?" I try to lead by example with my children. We talk about domestic violence and what has happened but I encourage them to see that the past is in the past and we

need to look forward. They recognize that I am trying to do better for us.

I've gone to school, I'm working. I don't talk about their father, no matter what. I want my children to form their own opinions about him because they are getting older. I teach my boys that hitting girls is unacceptable and I teach my girls that allowing a boy to hit them is unacceptable. I don't want my girls to deal with the same crap I dealt with. I think they get it. The main thing that I try and get them to focus on is not who Mommy used to be, but who Mommy is becoming. That's how I deal with my children and it works for me.

I believe that we all go through something for a reason and had I not gone through

the abuse I probably wouldn't be the woman that I am today. I'm not ashamed to say that I struggled with addiction. I'm not ashamed to say that I'm a survivor of domestic violence. If I don't put it out there other women won't know, or they'll stay stuck because they will continue to believe that there is no way out.

In closing, I just want to say, "Don't look down on anyone unless you're extending a hand to pick them up." I found so many times that people were looking down on me. They couldn't look beyond my faults and see the good in me. All they saw was an addict. Today, I am no longer that weak, broken woman. I am a strong, confident, independent, prayerful, virtuous woman of God.

Commentary

Sometimes women self medicate with drugs or alcohol to deal with the pain from their past. Too often this attempt at self care leads to an addiction. The cure becomes the curse that leads to further suffering and abuse.

Angela's story is all too familiar. Not only did her early experiences make her more likely to develop an addiction, but her addiction made her more vulnerable to abuse in later life. The abuse from her early life was re-enacted in a terrible spiral of violence and addiction which fed on one other.

Despite the odds, Angela found her way out. Who can say why some make it and others don't. Perhaps it was the many strengths she had to draw from... the arts, spirituality, a 12 Step community, helpful individuals met along the way, a determination or strength of spirit? The combination of trauma and addiction is almost too much for one soul to bear, but women manage, somehow to not only overcome these difficult and challenging odds, but to then become empowered and powerful women whose very survival makes them powers of example for their own children.



Gail Kielson

Carol

*Everyone along my journey
was very supportive*

We met back in 1983. I was 19 years old and I had just moved out of my parent's home into my first apartment. It was a duplex and I met him the first day I moved in. We became fast friends. He showered me with lots of attention. He took me out to dinner and to the movies and eventually we moved into our own apartment. That was when everything went downhill. I don't remember the first time he hit me. I do remember calling the police -who were right across the street where we lived at the time and it took the police almost an hour to come over. Back then, they couldn't do anything about it. It was my word against his. Even though I had a bloody nose and I had black and blues all over me and there was blood all over the floor, they couldn't do anything. They could file a report but they couldn't tell me if he was going to be arrested or not.

I moved out a couple of days later, back to my parent's house. I should never have taken his phone calls and listened to how sorry he was and listened to him tell me how much he loved me. But I was young and in love and wanted to be with him. Over time, we got back together. Eventually we married and we had two children. But over the course of almost 17 years the abuse escalated.

His family knew what was going on. There were family get-togethers and I would stay home. His style would be to hit me or say something right before we were supposed to leave. He was going alone or he was going to take the kids without me. Toward the end, I would call his family and say, "He's on his way by himself or with the kids. We just had a fight and this is what's going on." I told them, but no one listened to me. No one talked to him.

No one said, "What's going on? We're really worried about this." He was always good with the excuses. I'm not sure what he said to his family when I wasn't there but I'm sure it was always my fault.

I made excuses with my family from day one. He pushed me down the stairs one weekend and I had to go to the hospital. My nose was fractured. My nose was all swollen. My mom asked me what happened and I told her that I tripped down the stairs. She said that she had a feeling that something was wrong and she asked me a few times about it, but I said nothing was going on. I tripped on this or I tripped on that. I was basically ashamed. I didn't want people to know that he was hitting me. I think I knew all along that it was wrong, but I was beaten down so far into the dirt that I believed that it was my fault; and that if I told anyone, certain things would happen to me and no one would believe me. I thought I was the one who deserved it.

I now know that I was raped repeatedly. I was severely abused mentally, physically and emotionally, probably in every possible way imaginable. I didn't realize it at the time. I thought it was my fault. I was always the one trying to keep the peace and trying to make it up to him so that he wouldn't be mad at me anymore.

My kids were being abused. I don't know to what extent- except for what I saw. But I know he was pushing them around, calling them names. There was no excuse for that. They did nothing wrong. The abuse really

affected me as a mother. I was always on pins and needles. I made them be quiet when he came home because I didn't want to have a fight with him over things that were going on with my children. My oldest one would have nightmares. By the time he was two years old, he would wake up in the middle of the night screaming. I would go into my kids' room after my ex and I would have a fight and think that he wouldn't come into the kids' room and bother me and wake them up - but he did. I think I realized what it was doing to them and that was why I decided to leave. My kids have always come first in my life and nothing is going to take that away from me. I don't consider myself a great mother, but I think of myself as a very caring person who would do anything in the world for my children. I knew I had to get out of this abusive relationship for them.

The week before I decided to leave I was really down. We had a really bad fight. He had kept me up all night long and I thought he was going to rape me. That whole night he was yelling and hitting. He finally stopped about an hour before he went to work. I was curled up in a ball in another room, crying my eyes out, scared to death that he was going to come and finish me off. I'm sure that my kids heard everything that was going on, but they didn't come out until he was gone. He had taken my ATM card. He had taken the last ten dollars that I had. He had taken my car keys so that I couldn't go anywhere. Both of my children were little. They were not even four and two at the time. I decided right then and there that I needed to leave.

The morning I decided to leave I looked up the number of a shelter a few towns away from me. They told me I couldn't go there because it was too close and that it would be dangerous to stay there. I ended up calling another shelter. I remember it was a holiday and the buses that day weren't running on time; the trains weren't running on time either. I had no way of getting anywhere. My mom couldn't help because she had to go to a doctor's appointment that she couldn't be late for. The shelter said that they would call a cab for me and come down to get me. I knew I had to get out of the house by 3:30 because it was a holiday and he wasn't working overtime. I packed up as much stuff as I could. I got all the paperwork that I could find- birth certificates and my marriage license and social security cards. I took as many clothes and things for my kids as I possibly could. I packed everything and brought it downstairs. The cab came and picked us up just before he was due at home.

I was at the shelter for less than three weeks. Two weeks after we were there, my ex got the phone bill and found out the number of the shelter. He called the shelter and harassed them about where I was. They denied knowing me. He told them that he was going to hunt me down and make me pay for leaving. They woke me up in the middle of the night and told me that I needed to leave that weekend because they were afraid that he was going to come and find me. I wasn't allowed to go out from the time that they got that call until the time I left. I couldn't go anywhere. I was a prisoner

again because of this person. I was scared to death that he was going to find me. The people at the shelter helped me to find another shelter where I was able to get into and finally feel safe. My children were able to go out and play the day that we got there. I finally had a big sigh of relief because I felt that I wasn't going to be tracked down.

I was at that shelter for a couple of months and applied and was accepted in a transitional living program. Thank God for that!

There were times that I had no money and no child support. That took awhile to sink in. I was on welfare, which was very demeaning. I understand that people have no choice when they leave sometimes, for me it was very hard taking money from the state. I had to figure out how to pay for rent and food and daycare and everything else and I didn't have a job at the time.

I can't say that it didn't affect my younger son because I think it did, but my older son is very sensitive to things and takes things personally and thinks he's the one to blame. We started counseling when I was at the shelter and stayed with a counselor for a few years. It's taken a lot of work for him to come out of his shell and start trusting people. And now I can definitely see it. Now both of my kids like school and are doing really well. They are very proud of their accomplishments. I want to teach my kids to be good men. I want them to learn that it's not okay to hit anyone. It's not okay to call anyone names.

Before I called for help I didn't know much about domestic violence. I saw a couple of public service announcements about it, but that's all really. I also saw something about domestic violence on Oprah. She had Dr. Phil on and he was talking about a checklist of things to know if you are in a bad relationship. Everything was yes, yes, yes. I knew something was wrong but I couldn't do anything about it. I had to make myself believe that what I went through was abuse and that it wasn't my fault and that it wasn't my kids' fault. It was his fault and it needed to stop.

Everyone along my journey was very supportive. No one ever told me that I had made the wrong decision or that I should go back. When I was finally able to talk to my mom a couple of days after I left, she told me that she was very proud of me. She told me that he was calling and harassing her. She had to change her phone number. She said that she knew I

had made the right decision to leave and that I was a good mom. She wished that she had known earlier. She would have helped earlier. Everyone at the shelters and the transitional living program and the counselors and teachers and school principals... everyone was very supportive.

If you or someone you know is being abused, please get some help. Please make a phone call to the police or to a shelter. Get some advice about what to do. You can call anonymously. They can talk to you about your options and suggest things you can do. They can help you figure out whether to leave or to stay or whether to get a restraining order and have him leave.

When I was going through the abuse there was almost no one to turn to, but now there's a lot of help out there. More people are stepping in and saying, "You can do something about it."

Commentary

Imagine if Carol's husband's family had confronted him and held him accountable for his behavior. Imagine if any of the people with whom Carol came in contact had reached out and tried to help- perhaps years of abuse of both Carol and her children would have been prevented. Carol's abuse was so severe and the impact on her children so obvious that someone must have known what was happening in her home. Her story illustrates the power a bystander can have- to confront abuse or to offer compassionate support.

Carol is lucky to have escaped alive- how many broken bones and sleepless nights could have been averted if someone in the community had intervened and persisted even when Carol tried to explain her injury away. Stopping abuse is not the job of the victim; it is our job as members of a community. If we want safety, we have to step up and speak out about domestic violence.



Anonymous



Emily

*My Spiritual Foundation
Was My Rock*

I was married for 16 years to J., my children's father, but we were together for about 20 years. Looking back on it, I can see that he was always dictating what we did and with whom we spent our time. He dominated most of our activities, but it was only after the birth of our first son that I started to notice how controlling he could be.

I would stay home and parent our child while J. would go off and do what he wanted, the things we used to do as a couple. His life wasn't changing, but mine had to change dramatically because I had this infant to take care of. His needs were always more important than mine. He was always more tired. He always said he worked harder; he needed to sleep more because he had to get up early... that kind of thing. He was able

to convince me that he did work harder and was more tired and his needs were greater than mine. Stress was always the reason he gave for his behavior, the stress of his work. When my first child was young, J. would become very enraged and very loud. He would shove and poke and become explosive out of the blue.

We went to see a marriage counselor. I instinctively knew that if J. wasn't going to go with me, it wasn't going to work. Unfortunately, J. convinced her that I was basically the one with the problem.

J. was always blaming me for everything and he could be very scary and threatening. I remember I would be sleeping and he would get angry for whatever reason and he would end up storming out of the bedroom. I was really frightened of him

coming back and strangling me. Things got very bad at home and he was pretty much just angry all the time. I worried constantly about my children's safety. I finally said to him, "You can't behave this way to me or the kids. Either you go or I'll go."

The hardest thing in our community was that there was absolutely no community support. Almost all of my friends and most of the family took his side. A teacher that all of my sons knew said to me: "Emily, I can't believe your family has split up. You were one of the ones that I never thought this would happen to. You have 3 beautiful kids. I wish my kids were as normal as yours." That's a perfect description of our family. So when I tried to start saying to people, "Things are not right here. He's behaving really badly," they wouldn't hear me. People wouldn't believe me.

What was most terrifying to me was watching my oldest son being brainwashed by my husband. J. made up all these lies about me, telling my son that I was lazy and I didn't work around the house. He convinced my oldest son that he provided everything for our family and I pretty much did nothing. I saw my oldest completely buying it all and totally distancing himself from me.

I started reading a lot more books about relationships and marriage when we got my oldest son into counseling with a child therapist. It became apparent that J's behavior towards the kids and me was definitely not okay. I said, "Whoa, this isn't me. And this isn't the kids. And

this isn't stress. And this isn't because we don't have the money." At that point I actually went through the Yellow Pages, and I called a domestic violence program. I can remember going into my oldest son's bedroom and telling him that I had made the decision to separate and he looked at me like I was the worst, most horrible, evil woman in the whole world. I felt like I'd lost him forever. But I think subconsciously I thought, "Fine, if I can't get through to my oldest I have 2 other kids and I will not let J. get them as well."

I remember I was really worried about money. When we separated, I had a little salon in our house, but it did not bring in enough money to live on. I had no idea what was going to happen to my kids, but I knew I was going to do whatever I could do to be there for them. I had visions of him kidnapping them. I had visions of him killing me and the kids living with him. I had all of that going through my mind all the time-the very worst case scenario.

The divorce was pretty terrible. I got legal custody of the younger two and joint custody of our oldest. Visitation was very stressful and scary for them. Every time he took the kids I was terrified I'd never see them again. I got my kids cell phones. After the divorce it continued to be challenging. It got so bad that I refused to have any contact with him. I wouldn't answer his phone calls. When I had to be in touch with him I would write him a letter and leave him a voice message when I knew he wouldn't answer the phone. I documented his phone calls.

I think what initially got me through the divorce was my faith and my friends and the support I got from my counselor. She constantly showed me week after week that what I was seeing and hearing, that was not me. My work with her helped a lot. It took months and months of working with her to feel like I was coming out of the darkness. She helped me see that our separation was probably not going to be the typical one where our kids go back and forth between our houses and everything is okay. It took me a long time to identify that co-parenting wasn't going to work.

I also have a very strong spiritual foundation that I started building when my kids were small. I had pretty much given up everything else. Over the years he chipped away at whatever was mine. I had to give up friends and activities that had been important to me. My whole life revolved around taking care of him first and then the kids. I started building my spiritual foundation and that became my rock. The one thing I absolutely would not give up was my spiritual relationship with my faith community. He would have no part of it. He wouldn't allow the kids to go to any of the parts of worship. I compromised as much as I could but I wouldn't give it up totally and that drove him crazy because that was the one thing he couldn't control. We couldn't discuss spirituality in the house. We couldn't talk about the Bible, we couldn't talk about God. But when he wasn't around I would talk to my kids all the time about spirituality - everything that I was learning. They knew we couldn't talk about it in front of their dad. We listened to

Bible tapes in the car because I just felt as though they needed to have that spiritual connection. I had the Bible to back me up. I could say, "You know, this isn't coming from just me, this is coming from your Creator. So even though Dad says it's okay to talk to me that way and to treat you guys that way and to scream and yell and curse at you, our faith teaches us that it's not okay." In my faith it's serious to separate and divorce. Eventually it became clear to our body of elders what was happening in our family and they took it very seriously. They were extremely supportive.

I think what also really helped us was having a peaceful place to live. I cannot express how healing that was. And my kids are so appreciative of that. When they go to spend time with their dad, they know that they can come back to a peaceful home. I'm not saying we're perfect, but we deal with the normal stress of day to day. My younger sons spend every other weekend with their dad and most of the time it's pretty good. But we have a back-up plan to make sure they feel protected there. And they are really good at taking care of each other.

I tried to help my sons understand that their dad's behavior was not acceptable - not by criticizing their father directly, but by pointing out the same behavior when we saw it in others and by giving them a space to talk about it. My oldest son and I can even talk now about his dad's abusive behavior. He has seen him being abusive to his girlfriend's son and it's painful for all of us, but we talk about it. We've become really close.

I would say if you have kids and you feel like you're losing them, don't give up on them. Eventually, they'll get it. And try not to lose yourself because that's the one thing that your kids will continually see day to day - just hang on by your fingernails if that's what it takes. Try to remember that you are a strong person, a person that deserves to be happy.

Living in a small rural community there's this kind of 'Yankee behavior,' - whatever you want to call it - you know, 'that's their business, don't interfere.' There were those who were always right there,

even when everything looked okay on the outside. These were the people that took an interest in my life; they were the ones that helped the most.

I think people in this situation need to keep hearing that it can be better. There isn't one formula for every person but letting people know that it can be better is really important. I have a close friend who is going through a similar situation and she tells me and my kids what an encouragement it is for her knowing that it can be done. She saw what we went through and it gives her hope.



Commentary

The isolation and lack of support from the community Emily experienced is typical of small rural towns. Living in a rural community is geographically isolating and being abused compounds that seclusion. Abusers typically appear to the outside world as "normal". In a small town where everyone knows everyone else, it can be hard to believe that your neighbor or the store owner or the guy you have a beer with at the local bar is terrifying his wife and children behind closed doors.

After so many years in an abusive relationship, it would have been easy for Emily to lose hope. However, Emily's faith not only helped her survive the abuse and begin healing, it also gave her the strength to leave. The religious teachings of her faith helped her recognize that her husband's behavior was abusive to both her and her children. Her spirituality was sacred to her and her husband could not defile or destroy her faith or abuse her into giving it up. The support of her faith community also made it possible for Emily to end her marriage and create a healthy and peaceful home for her family.

Did you know?

Around the world, at least one in every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused during her lifetime (Population Reports, 2000).

One-third of American women (31%) report being physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives (The Commonwealth Fund, 1999).

Relationship violence is not limited to physical abuse.

Relationship violence can also include:

- Verbal abuse such as name calling, constant put downs, humiliation and shaming.
- Threatening behavior and intimidation such as driving too fast, punching walls or breaking personal belongings, or threatening to hurt children or pets
- Forced unwanted sex
- Isolation from family and friends
- Financial abuse such as controlling all the money and household resources

Relationship violence can happen in same-sex relationships and teen dating relationships.

If you are worried that you or someone you care about is in an unhealthy relationship ask these questions:

Does your partner or spouse:

Call you names or constantly belittle you?

Blame you for all the problems in the relationship?

Constantly criticize you?

Try to control where you go, who you see, what you do?

Scare you or make intimidating or threatening gestures?

Verbally threaten you?

Act extremely jealous and possessive?

Physically hurt you, your pets or your children?

Insist on making all the important household or family decisions?

Say that it's your fault that they act that way?

What You Can Do to Help Someone in an Abusive Relationship

You may be an important part of a person's journey to safety. For many victims of abuse it takes a lot of time, planning, help and courage to escape the violence. In the meantime, it is important for victims to know that help is available from people who know and care about the situation.

An Important Note: According to the Federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, females are more likely than males to experience non-fatal intimate partner violence. For this reason, in this document, we have chosen to use the pronoun, 'her' and 'she', for convenience and consistency.

Listening is important.

Often the best response is to be a good listener. The only expert on this issue is the abused woman herself. Let her teach you about her experience. Let her express her hurt and anger. It is important to affirm without judgment what she says and feels.

Let the person know that you care.

This may be the first time she has told her story to anyone. While talking about this might be difficult for both of you, let her know that you are glad she is willing to talk with you.

Believe the person.

Victims of domestic violence often feel hesitant to reveal abuse for fear that they will not be believed. Generally, women

minimize the extent of the violence. Your belief in her story may help her survive.

Allow her to make her own decisions.

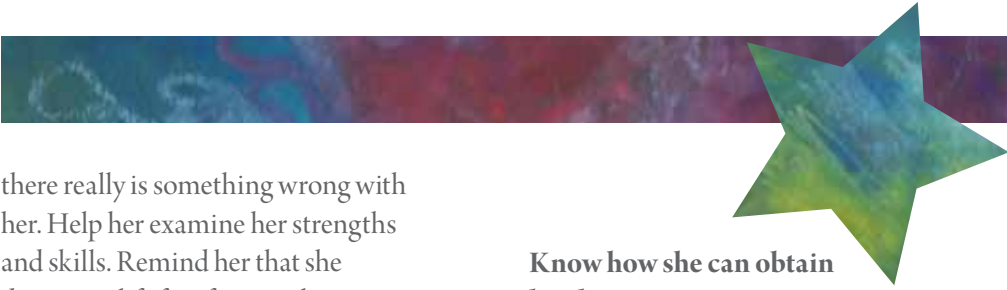
Try to understand the many obstacles that keep her from getting free. Focus on supporting her in making her own decisions. If she is being battered, he is exercising a lot of control over her life. Making choices for her - even if it is staying with the abuser for now - is often the first step towards freedom. Even if she leaves him and then goes back, don't withdraw your support. Many battered women leave and return several times before leaving for good.

Provide information on help available.

Many abused women who found freedom describe someone they knew (a neighbor, doctor, friend) offering support and referring them to an advocacy group. Let her know that she is not alone and that people are available to help her. Assure her that they will keep her information confidential. To find this information call your local domestic violence program; numbers are listed later in this publication.

Focus on her strengths.

Abused women live with emotional as well as physical abuse. The abuser may continually tell her that she is worthless. The victim may feel that she can't do anything right and that



there really is something wrong with her. Help her examine her strengths and skills. Remind her that she deserves a life free from violence.

Give her time.

A person in an abusive relationship must struggle with severe social, emotional, and economic obstacles as she begins to free herself from an abusive relationship. She needs time and patience from her support system throughout this process. The most important thing you can do is to offer support and to help her rebuild a sense of self worth.

Know how she can obtain legal protection.

A domestic violence program or district attorney's office can often assist her in filing a protective order or criminal complaint to prevent further abuse from occurring.

Take care of yourself too

It can be very difficult supporting someone in an abusive relationship. It's important to get the support and information you need as well. Domestic violence programs are a supportive resource available to you as well.

Contributors

- 1) **Nancy** is a 47 year old Caucasian woman living in a small rural community in Berkshire County. She has two teenaged daughters and was recently married.
- 2) **Maria** is the mother of a 10 year old son. She is Latina and she currently lives in a small city in western Massachusetts. She is originally from Central America.
- 3) **Jamie** is a Caucasian 18 year old college student living with his mom and younger brother in a small rural community in western Massachusetts. He wrote this essay for a school assignment when he was 15 years old.
- 4) **Maya**, a 40 year old Caucasian woman lives in a small town in Massachusetts. Maya is currently happily married and the mother of 2 sons.
- 5) **Angela** is a 45-year-old African American woman and a survivor of domestic violence. She has four children, ages 15, 12, 11 and 9. She works in a local hospital.
- 6) **Carol** is a 31 year old survivor of domestic violence. Her sons are 3 and 5 years old. She is Caucasian and grew up in a rural town in Eastern Massachusetts.
- 7) **Emily** is in her early 40's. She is a Caucasian mother of three boys living in a small rural town in western Massachusetts. Two of her three sons live with her and her oldest son lives with his grandfather nearby.

Confidential Community Resources:

Support and confidential help are available. Remember that you are not alone.

Statewide Resources:

SafeLink:

1-877-785-2020; TTY: 1-877-521-2601

Free 24/7 hotline; crisis intervention, safety planning, referrals for shelter
www.casamyrna.org/safelink.html

The Network/La Red:

1-617-742-4911 (TTY/Voice)

Free 24/7 hotline; free confidential support, counseling, advocacy and emergency housing for lesbian, bisexual and transgender women: www.thenetworklared.org

Llamanos y Hablemos:

1-800-223-5001 (TTY/Voice)

Free confidential support, counseling and referrals for Spanish speaking survivors of sexual assault and abuse. M-S 9-5pm. www.llamanos.org

Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project:

1-800-832-1901 (Voice)

Free 24/7 hotline, confidential counseling, legal advocacy, economic assistance and emergency housing for gay and bisexual men. www.gmdvp.org

Massachusetts Certified Batterer Intervention Programs:

www.mass.gov/dph/fch/bi

Counseling and intervention groups for men and women with abusive behaviors

National Resources:

National Network to End Domestic Violence:

1-800-799-7233 (SAFE); TTY 1-800-787-3224

Free 24/7 hotline, crisis intervention, safety planning, referrals for counseling and shelter.
www.nnedv.org

RAINN: Rape Abuse and Incest National Network:

1-800-656-HOPE (TTY/Voice)

Free 24/7 hotline; crisis intervention www.rainn.org

*Courtesy of the Moving Forward Domestic Abuse
Project of the Men's Resource Center for Change